DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 188 210 CS 205 636

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TITLE The Nature of Writing Laboratory Instruction for the Developing Writer.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 16p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (31st, Washington, DC, March 13-15, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Feedback: Higher Education: *Individual Instruction: Interaction: *Learning Laboratories: Remedial Instruction: *Skill Development: *Student Teacher Relationship: Teacher Role: Tutoring: *Writing (Composition): *Writing Instruction: Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Audience Awareness: *Composition Process: Invention (Rhetorical): Revision (Written Composition)

ABSTRACT

Four assumptions about factors leading to writing improvement may be related to instruction in supplemental writing laboratories (or "writing labs") that use tutorial conferencing to serve students needing help with classroom assignments or specific skills. The assumptions and their relation to writing lab instruction are as follows: (1) Writers must have dialogue with readers and must practice at becoming their own readers. The lab instructor serves as the audience and is seen as a helpful, nonthreatening reader rather than as a grader. The instructor responds immediately and directly to students' writing, and the instructor/student dialogue externalizes the heuristic that must go on in a writer's mind. (2) A writer must actively engage the content of the message and must understand and participate in the processes of invention. In the writing lab, students can be encouraged to ask real questions of the subject matter and to discover through prewriting what they know about a topic. (3) A writer must write when he or she is ready to write. In the lab, the instructor can choose the appropriate moment to encourage students to transfer to paper what has just been discovered in dialogue. (4) A writer must have dialogue with the written product. In the immediacy of the lab situation, students can be drawn constantly to what they have written and helped to develop an "editing sensibility." They can be helped with error remediation before the written product is graded. (GT)

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The Nature of Writing Laboratory Instruction for the Developing Writer

Rudolph Paul Almasy

In this essay, I would like to discuss four assumptions we make about the teaching of writing and to relate these assumptions to writing laboratory instruction. This relationship suggests that there is, very definitely, a certain kind of laboratory pedagogy and that this pedagogy--which is clearly related to the conference or tutorial method of instruction[1]--reflects what many have said about the teaching of writing. Once we begin to examine the characteristics of laboratory instruction and see how these characteristics reflect contemporary strategies for teaching writing, we can begin to articulate the philosophy of teaching which underlies laboratory instruction. We might also begin to understand how, in some areas, laboratory teaching is unique and perhaps even more effective than classroom instruction.

Before I proceed any further, I would like to define the kind of writing laboratory I am speaking of, for we need always to keep in mind when talking about labs that there are several different kinds of enterprises we call writing labs or learning skills centers.[2] In this discussion, I am focusing on the laboratory which can be termed "the supplemental writing lab." That is to say, this laboratory, for the most part, supplements writing instruction which is going on in the classroom in semester-long or quarter-long courses. The typical student who is served by the supplemental lab seeks help with classroom assignments or specific skill areas. This student works at the lab on a voluntary basis for several visits or can be referred to the lab by the classroom

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instructor or required to attend. The two basic instructional components of the supplemental writing lab are tutorial conferencing and short instructional units or modules that integrate tutorial feedback with exercises and writing.[3] Although students can visit the lab on a regular basis, the supplemental writing lab does not offer structured courses in writing, nor does it offer credit. It relies, for the most part, on students coming voluntarily, sharing their work with a laboratory instructor and exerting effort and time to improve skills once problem areas have been identified. Students who find support and success in such a personalized and individualized learning environment are motivated to return often--perhaps throughout the academic term.

A supplemental writing lab such as I have described devises its programs, develops its materials, and trains its staff on the basis of certain identifiable assumptions about how best to continue the student's acquisition of writing skills. We can begin to discuss these assumptions by visualizing the student's activities and the instructor's activities at the writing lab. First of all, the supplemental lab offers a student the opportunity to bring to a lab instructor a piece of writing, either complete or in draft, which the student is preparing for class. This important scenario calls attention to our first assumption: to improve one's writing, a writer must have dialogue with the reader and must practice at becoming his or her own reader. In the scenario the laboratory instructor serves as the audience and encourages the writer to share the written work, thus reinforcing Joseph Comprone's reading of Kenneth Burke that writing is a pro-

cess of sharing.[4]

We must mention here one of the unique characteristics of laboratory instruction which truly promotes dialogue between writer and reader. The student knows the laboratory instructor is not the grader, is, in fact, perceived as advocate or supporter rather than judge. The classroom teacher, on the other hand, is perceived as grader and judge; and seldom can a student, therefore, use that classroom teacher as audience. As long as teachers give grades, students will try to write, perhaps unnaturally, for this grader, will write for the teacher, and will spend profitless time in the familiar quagmire of "what does she want" or "what does he want."

When the student allows the laboratory instructor to share his or her writing, the instructor becomes an objective, inquisitive, helpful, nonthreatening reader but not a grader. Furthermore, it is a reader who responds immediately and directly to the writer about what is written, responds not in the form of written comments, grades, or points but in the form of questions. Immediately, connections between reader and writer, like those Richard Beach discusses,[5] begin to be established. Immediately, the writer is thrown back, in a sense, onto the writing because the requirements of the reader--who happens to be sitting right next to the writer--begin to articulated.

The dialogue which thus ensues between writer and laboratory instructor can take many directions depending on the expertise and skill of the instructor. But each direction can be sensed as a demand of the audience, a demand which the writer must be conscious

of and must respond to completely and fully. This talking over the written message allows the writer to test the direction of his thoughts and allows the reader to react to partially articulated ideas, to matters of coherence and development. In other words, the laboratory instructor's questions and comments externalize the heuristic that must go on in the mind of a writer as he fulfills his responsibility to share the message fully with the audience.

Surely no one will doubt the legitamacy of this first assumption--that a writer must have dialogue with the reader. The question, however, which is so seldom addressed is how best to accomplish this objective. What kind of practice is needed so that a developing writer does actually begin to have genuine dialogue with the audience? I would suggest that one of the best practices is this sharing between supportive lab instructor and student writer. The practice here begins, of course, as an external dialogue. And the writing laboratory's ultimate purpose must be to encourage the writer to internalize this dialogue.

What has already been said suggests the second assumption about the teaching of writing: to improve one's writing, a writer must actively engage the content of the message, must understand the processes of invention, and must be able and willing to participate in those processes. This assumption includes at least three directions for the developing writer: finding something to say, finding something more to say when the topic has been only partially developed, and being open during thinking and writing activities to discover what can be said or what one

knows about a topic. We are all familiar with these pre-writing activities, the "writing befcre writing" as Don Murray calls it.[6] For Murray, this may also be called the "rehearsal stage" when students identify the needs of the audience, the demand for increasing information, and their own growing concerns for the topic.

We also know that students have been told about these areas and that they have read about them over and over. But the question which again arises is how can these skills be taught; how can a student be led to engage in the pre-writing, rehearsal stage. Here, again, the value of a sympathetic, inquisitive, and articulate laboratory instructor is inestimable. Jacqueline Berke, in her text Twenty Questions for the Writer, reminds students of of the overwhelming importance of "asking the right questions."[7] The question becomes the "probing instrument" of the writer. The problem here is that it is one thing to tell a student to ask the right questions and another thing to lead the student to actually do the questioning. I would suggest that for the developing writer the internal heuristic that Berke elaborates on in her text must be initially practiced externally, and I would further suggest that profitable practice takes place between a developing writer and a laboratory instructor. Again, the objectivity and impartiality of the lab teacher--over against those of the classroom teacher--are perhaps more apparent to the unskilled writer. In the lab the student can be encouraged to ask real questions of the subject matter rather than to try to determine not what he or she wants to write about but what the teacher wants to hear.

In the writing laboratory, a student can find someone who

will help him to discover something to say. Of course, a skilled classroom teacher may also be able to do this, but what are the ramifications for the grader and for the hesitant writer when that writer stands (or sits) before the "judge" and admits "I don't know what to write about?" There is, perhaps, less fear in exposing one's inadequacies in the writing lab. If the problem is momentary confusion or frustration, the lab instructor begins to ask questions and begins to lead the student to probe further. The same scenario is rehearsed when a student, who already has a subject, has not adequately developed that subject or who has frustratingly concluded "I don't know what else to say." Together writer and laboratory instructor can review the partially written product; together they can discuss various possibilities that exist in the subject matter; together they can take the time--without worrying about the grade--to ask questions, to think aloud. Furthermore, is not this external heuristic also an effective way for a writer to discover what he or she knows about a subject? Does not the "thinking aloud" between student and lab instructor demonstrate a fruitful pose for that writer who needs to be open to discover what can be said? Pre-writing strategies cannct be learned without practice. Regrettably, the classroom often does not offer the open-ended practice that a developing writer needs.[8] The laboratory, on the other hand, may be the way to fulfill Murray's plea that "we should work with our students to help them understand the process of rehearsal, to allow them the experience of rehearsing what they will write in their minds, on the paper, and with collaborators."[9]

With the value of pre-writing practice in our minds, we can list the third assumption about learning to write, an assumption that can be acted upon in the laboratory: to improve one's writing, a writer must do writing when he or she is ready to write. Few would disagree with Roger Garrison's sentence: "The student learns writing when he is writing. Period."[10] What must be kept in mind, however, is that the student must be ready to write, must be mentally alert, and must be brimming with ideas and impressions. Let us once again return to the laboratory scenario. We have already mentioned three typical problems that a developing writer can bring to the lab instructor: finding something to write about, finding something more that can be written about a subject, and discovery through pre-writing what one knows about a topic, what one wants to write about that topic, and what one is able to write. In each instance, external heuristics have been used to help the student engage the writing. There has been talking; there has been dialogue; there has been thinking aloud. What's next?

The answer, of course, is writing. For the dialogue between writer and reader to be of most value, the writer must immediately transfer on to paper what has been discovered or awakened in dialogue. Is there anyone who underestimates the importance of getting started and of transferring onto paper what has just sprung from the imagination. The composing process compells, so often, a forward movement, compels the writer to get down those thoughts and impression that so easily disappear in a moment. The laboratory offers the student the supportive environment for getting started in writing the assigment, or for continuing with fresh

ideas and enthusiasm the project that has only partially emerged, or for being open during writing to the discoveries that await the eager writer as the inner voice speaks.[11]

After any discussions with the writer, the laboratory instructor can easily say to the student: "Why don't you go over to that table and do some writing; I'll be here if you have any questions. In a few minutes I'll see how you are doing, and we'll talk some more." Again, we can sense the advantage of laboratory instruction over classroom instruction. Of course, writing in the classroom often takes place, but the amount of useful interaction between teacher and student will be severely limited because of the number of students in the classroom and the limited space. And although useful dialogue can take place in the office, offices are more intimidating than laboratories; and, furthermore, the office is seldom designed to allow the student to act immediately upon the suggestions that have arisen in the conference. The student must pick up his books, leave the office, trek to some appropriate place to write, and maybe then--after being bombarded with all kinds of distractions--start to write, trying to recapture the vital information, the fruitful thought processes, that he had within his grasp some time ago.

Clearly we can see here the value of a laboratory which is designed for writing and which can serve the student who should move directly and immediately from talking to writing. Furthermore, we can see how important it is for a lab instructor to know when to stop the conversation and to direct the student--now that she is ready--to start writing. As Garrison argues, "the problem in

teaching writing is to find ways to keep students writing nearly all the time and to provide constant and almost immediate feedback for each student as he wrestles with a problem of expression."[12]

Once a student begins producing a written product, that written product must be used in special ways by that writer. And so our fourth assumption: to improve one's writing, a writer must have dialogue with the written product. Actually there are at least two dialogues that can take place here, and often the two are simultaneous although they need not be. We have already covered the first. I am speaking of that dialogue that arises between writer and a partially written or partially developed message. This dialogue should be heuristic in nature so that content can be discovered or so that the message can open up new possibilities for the student who comes to engage the composing process actively. Such dialogue leads to practice in the type of revision Don Murray speaks of; that is, "what the writer does after a draft is completed to understand and communicate what has begun to appear on the page. The writer reads to see what has been suggested, then confirms, alters, or develops it, usually through many drafts."[13]

The second type of dialogue leads not to revision but to editing. The student's efforts are focused on matters of language, style, usage, and mechanics. As the student is constantly drawn to what has been put down onto paper, learns to watch for troublesome areas, and keeps the eyes open for changes that need to be made, the developing writer practices those skills which make of writing a deliberate act. What we are trying to teach in this part of the composing process is what might be called an "editing

sensibility." We want students to be aware of their diction and to ask themselves whether they have used the proper word or the precise word. We want students to see when they have used the passive voice and to change it to active if that is what is needed. We want students to revise individual sentences or groups of sentences if the information would be more effectively stated through oppositions cr relatives or absolutes. We want students to use commas and apostrophes correctly. And, of course, we want them to correct misspellings.

There can be no doubt that the editing sensibility is a learned skill or habit. For the skill to be consistently and successfully practiced, however, three things are in order. A student needs information. Writers don't misuse commas because they want to; they misuse commas because they lack information on the uses of punctuation marks and the nature of written sentences. Secondly, the student needs to know in what areas he or she is prone to err. Are there consistent difficulties with idiomatic preposition usage or pronoun reference? Does the student tend to overuse the "to be" verb? Does the writer fail to provide transitional markers for the reader? Thirdly, the student has to allow himself to be thrown back onto the writing, has to be trained to move from right to left against the more natural left to right writing and reading movements. In other words, proficient writers experience writing as a recursive act.

We ask, once more, how best can the skills be taught. How do we continue to train a student to be a deliberate writer and editor? The classroom teacher hopes that this can be accomplished

by marginal comments and concluding remarks, by conferences inside and outside the classroom, by handbook references and exercises, and by editing or "revising" assignments. All these activities may be useful, but they may not have the immediacy that laboratory instruction can have.

In the writing lab a student can have specific difficulties identified either during the writing act or during dialogue with an instructor over a piece of writing. Even the graded theme can be used profitably, focusing on it in terms of future writing as Joyce S. Steward reminds us.[14] We should remember that diagnosing in these various ways is not viewed as penalizing or as coming from the hand of the grader. Furthermore, remediation can begin immediately in the lab once a deficiency is spotted since a good laboratory will have self-instructional or tutorial modules available for its students. While the classroom student has to leave the teacher's conference to work somewhere else in a handbook, the laboratory student can directly move from diagnosis to remediation and then back to the lab instructor who can relate exercise work, which has just been done, to that student's writing. And finally, as lab instructor and student consistently review together the written products they rehearse what the student, we hope, will eventually do alone. The developing writer learns skills that throw him back onto the writing and that prepare him to be independent.

Unlike graders, who are so often under the compulsion to mark all errors, lab instructors can single out one or two areas for remediation. Working slowly on one problem at a time usually has results. The personalized attention of laboratory instruction also

helps writers see the importance of stylistic and usage correctness, helps them take their errors seriously, and teaches them what they need to know either to avoid the error or to correct it if it appears again. Finally--and most important--error identification and remediation can take place before the written product is submitted for a grade. We know that a student seldom returns to a paper that has been graded. Why should she? There's little that can be done once the thing is written and graded. In the writing laboratory, on the other hand, opportunity exists to help a student engage the written product before the paper's worthiness has been judged--at a time when the student is still ready and willing to have dialogue with that product.

We all agree with Josephine Miles who argues that the study of composition can be a "steadily accruing and culminating practice."[15] The writing lab continues the student's acquisition of writing skills by directing energy and effort to activities which teach the student that writing is a process that must be entered into in a lively and deliberate manner. The position that I have advanced in this essay argues that conference instruction through a supplemental writing laboratory can be instrumental in offering the kinds of practice that are effective for a developing writer. A writing lab certainly can affect the attitude of a writer towards the process of composing, even towards individual writing assignments, for it offers an environment conducive to writing, an environment which is characterized by personalized and individualized instruction, by nonthreatening writing and learning opportunities, and by consistent, positive reinforcement. Furthermore,

laboratory instruction directly relates agreed upon assumptions about how to teach writing to the efforts of developing writers. Taken as a whole, the lab's focus encourages the student to see writing as a process, to engage deliberately in the process, to return always to the written product, and to experience the value of genuine dialogue.

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NOTES

1. See Roger H. Garrison, "One-to-One: Tutorial Instruction in Freshman Composition," New Directions for Community Colleges, Spring, 1974, pp. 55-83.

2. See Learning Skills Centers: A CCCC Report, ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and Conference on College Composition and Communication (NCTE), 1976.

3. The combination of tutorial conferencing and lab modules is described in my article "Instructional Materials for the Writing Laboratory," College Composition and Communication, December 1977, pp. 400-403.

4. Joseph Comprone, "Kenneth Burke and the Teaching of Writing," College Composition and Communication, December 1978, pp. 336-40.

5. Richard Beach, "Self-Evaluation Strategies," College Composition and Communication, May 1976, pp. 1160-64.

6. Donald M. Murray, "Writing Before Writing," College Composition and Communication, December 1978, pp. 375-81.

7. Jacqueline Berke, Twenty Questions for the Writer, 2nd ed., (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1976), p. 19.

8. For some useful suggestions on how classroom teachers can promote "dialogue" with their students, see Ann B. Dobie, "From Grading to Guiding," Freshman English News, Winter 1977, pp. 19-21. Dobie writes: "Teachers of composition, notoriously reluctant to change traditional methods of teaching regardless of how clumsy they have become, may object that shifting the instructor's function from grader to guide will reduce his effectiveness. However, because writing is an act of communication, the fledgling writer needs, above all, another person with whom he can join in dialogue. More than a simple letterlabel, he needs a respondent who will question his ideas and dispute his arguments, pushing him to clarify, prove, persuade" (p. 21).

9. Page 380.

10. Page 59.

11. For a significant discussion of the importance of internal revision during writing, of discovery and the composing process, see Donald M. Murray, "Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery in Research on Composing: Points of Departure, ed., Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (NTCE, 1978), pp. 85-103.

12. Page 56.

13. Page 87.

14. "To Like to Have Written: Learning the Laboratory Way," ADE Bulletin, September, 1975, pp. 32-43.

15. Josephine Miles, "What We Already Know About Composition and What We Need to Know," College Composition and Communication, May 1976, p. 140.